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Practical reasoning as citizens: on the shifting conditions of public discourse

Abstract

In *Dependent Rational Animals* (DRA), MacIntyre argues that, to inclusively pursue the common good, people need to draw from the resources of intermediate structures of society. Here the individuals become practical reasoners, with the ability to engage in public discourse and political deliberation.

Two ongoing transformations within these intermediate structures suggest a reassessment of the MacIntyrean analysis:

 (i) Practical reasoning is "reasoning together with others, generally within some determinate set of social relationships" (DRA, p. 107), but persons increasingly belong to very diverse communities of practice among which they transfer cultural beliefs, specifications of virtue and forms of argumentation. For an individual to become a practical reasoner is thus to combine these multiple affiliations with the traditional task of finding "one's place within a network of givers and receivers in which the achievement of one's individual good is understood to be inseparable from the achievement of the common good" (DRA, p. 113). To recognize this inseparable connection citizens have to reflectively acknowledge that the pursuit of the common good requires the engagement with a plurality of conceptions of the good and that no single network holds all the discursive and ethical resources needed for public deliberation.

 (ii) MacIntyre argues that "market relationships can only be sustained by being embedded in certain types of local nonmarket relationship, relationships of uncalculated giving and receiving, if they are to contribute to overall flourishing" (DRA, p. 117). What the sociology of new media observes, though, is not just the detachment but rather the reverse embedding of nonmarket relationships into market relationships. Social networks create digital environments that fuel market goals by making use of the attention and trust people nurture by sharing their personal lives and affective relations. This process has an impact on public discourse, as it transforms personal relationships into a vehicle to aggregate polarized collective identities rather than to develop forms of shared reasoning and decision-making on the common good.

In the light of this twofold analysis, a partial reconsideration of MacIntyre's account of political interactions among citizens is presented.

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Paper

Pursuit of the common good and intermediate structures of society

In Chapter 9 of *Dependent Rational Animals* (DRA), MacIntyre argues that, to pursue the common good, people need to draw from resources of practical reasoning they acquire through their participation in relations of giving and receiving within intermediate structures of society. The *conditions of public discourse among citizens* in a democratic society can be traced back to this interplay between the kind of relationships that people entertain with each other in their communities and the formation of their ability to engage with each other as independent practical reasoners. In MacIntyre's analysis, in fact, practical reasoning is

> reasoning together with others, generally within some determinate set of social relationships. Those relationships are initially formed and then developed as the relationships through which each of us first achieves and is then supported in the status of independent practical reasoner. They are generally and characteristically first of all relationships of the family and household, then of schools and apprenticeships, and then of the range of practices in which adults of that particular society and culture engage. (DRA: 107)

By making and sustaining those specific kinds of relationships, people come to develop disposition and activities that are essential to reasoning, at the same time, about their own good and the collective good of the community:

> So the good of each cannot be pursued without also pursuing the good of all those who participate in those relationships. For we cannot have a practically adequate understanding of our own good, of our own flourishing, apart from and independently of the flourishing of that whole set of social relationships in which we have found our place. (DRA: 107-108)

The connection goes also the other way: not only those specific kinds of relationship foster the ability of persons to engage in practical reasoning, but for those relationships to flourish they need to be based on the collective exercise of reasoning according to shared standards and towards common goods:

> When a network of such familial, neighborhood, and craft relationships is in a flourishing state, when, that is, there is a flourishing local community, it will always be because those activities of the members of that community that aim at their common good are informed by their practical rationality. (DRA: 108)

According to MacIntyre, then, this picture is fully realized in local communities, where people depend on each other and where someone's needs provide reasons for action to the other members of that community, to the point that individual good is defined based on the recognition of the goods of the community as one's own. The pursuit of this co-implication between individual and collective goods requires that people deliberate together on the allocation of responsibilities towards the achievement of those goods and the establishment of shared rules that govern the social cooperation required by the joint effort. Not any moral subject is apt to participate in these forms of communal life: only insofar as they acquire relevant virtues, they can also contribute to the flourishing of their own communities.

This kind of collective pursuit of the good identifies a model of citizenship and political engagement that is characteristic of local communities, where "perhaps to a greater extent than we have realized there is a already a degree of shared recognition of the common good" (DRA: 144). The politics of such communities "is not a politics of competing interests in the way the politics of the modern state is. For the basic political question is what resources each individual and group needs, if it is to make its particular contribution to the common good" (DRA: 144). The citizen of a political community of this kind is thus essentially an independent reasoning contributor to the common good that is bound with others in a local network of mutual dependencies, not out of self-interest, but based on the acknowledgment of the shared nature of that good.

Within this picture, a *major threat to these conditions of public discourse and deliberation among citizens* is the erosion of the kinds of relationship through which they become independent practical reasoners in the way described above. MacIntyre looks here in particular at the increasing dichotomy between relations governed by interest and mutual advantage on one side and relations guided by affection and gratuity on the other. This dichotomy, he argues, is affirmed by a prevailing ideological trend that is quite apparently impacting on the evolution of contemporary societies:

> This is of course not only a view taken by economic and philosophical theorists. It has provided more than one government with an ideological justification for its policies and many individuals with an ideological justification for their way of life, but it has been an ideology to which it has proved remarkably difficult to give wholly consistent adherence. (DRA: 115)

This is, ultimately, a disastrous rift that determines the gradual inability of people to engage with each other in the pursuit of the common good. And, remarkably, it is a trend that also goes to the detriment of economic relations of interest, since "market relationships can only be sustained by

being embedded in certain types of local nonmarket relationship, relationships of uncalculated giving and receiving, if they are to contribute to overall flourishing" (DRA: 117).

The widening of this dichotomy, pursued by the liberal tradition to enhance the freedom of choice and exchange among individuals and private entities, overlooks that outside of very short terms transactions, all our economic and civil interactions rely on the solid network of relationships of giving and receiving that is characteristic of local communities, where the exchanged is not based on interest, but need. In this sense, MacIntyre states:

> Norms of giving and receiving are then to some large degree presupposed both by our affective ties and by our market relationships. Detach them from this background presupposition in social practice and each becomes a source of vice: on the one hand a romantic and sentimental overvaluation of feeling as such, on the other a reduction of human activity to economic activity. These are complementary vices which can and sometimes do inform one and the same way of life. (DRA: 117-118)

Not unlike other instances of MacIntyre's philosophical work, the account he offers in these pages is an attempt to articulate a general neo-Aristotelian interpretation of how people become practical reasoners and citizens together with a diagnosis of how this kind of process is currently historically endangered by the hegemony of a liberal paradigm of social and political relations that has deeply affected the way modern societies and their institutions operate.

While this certainly contributes to the critical power of his analysis, it also partially binds the relevance of some of his normative considerations to an interpretive picture – that of western liberal democracies that he observes prior to the publication of DRA, during the 80s and 90s – that is not entirely applicable to the current state of American and European societies. In particular, I argue that two ongoing transformations within the intermediate structures of society suggest a partial reformulation of the MacIntyrean analysis, when it comes to both, first, the *characterization of the conditions of public discourse* among citizens and, second, the corresponding *threat of a dichotomy between market and nonmarket relationships*.

Let us address these two points in turn.

Delocalized social dependencies and multiple communities of practice

To properly engage in public discourse, we need to mature an adequate understanding of our own good and that is possible only within the "whole set of social relationships in which we have found our place" (DRA: 108), MacIntyre argues. But where do we "find our place" in our societies? Increasingly, not only at a local level and not necessarily in a single main community of reference. Instead of cultivating our relations within a specific community whose boundaries tend to overlap

with our surroundings, we tend to find "our place*s*" across different communities and these communities do not all reside in a single space. This trend is, first, the result of the joint influence of a *pluralization of our affiliations to different communities of practice*, each with their own internal cultures and values, and, second, of a *delocalization of relevant social networks due to the advent of the internet.*

Since the late 90s, and especially during the 2000s, the academic literature focused on the inner workings of the intermediate organizations of society, especially associations and professional groups, has pointed out that people increasingly belong to multiple communities of practice among which they transfer cultural beliefs, specifications of virtue and forms of argumentation. Etienne Wenger, one of the leading figures in the theorizing of the communities of practices, speaks of the increasingly relevant experience of belonging to many communities and how "all these various forms of participation contribute in some way to the production of our identities" (Wenger 1999: 158).

For an individual to become a practical reasoner is thus to combine this experience of multiple affiliations with the MacIntyrean task of finding "one's place within a network of givers and receivers in which the achievement of one's individual good is understood to be inseparable from the achievement of the common good" (DRA: 113). To recognize this inseparable connection, the members of these communities have to reflectively acknowledge that the pursuit of the common good requires the engagement with a plurality of understandings of the good and that no single network of relations holds all the discursive and ethical resources needed for public deliberation on the collective good. This determines a situation where the individual learns to deal on the one side with an experience of multimembership in a diverse set of communities and on the other with the work of reconciliation necessary to shape her identity across boundaries. This work of reconciliation has individual importance, but also potentially transformative social effects, as it intertwines the trajectories of multiple communities and establishes a transformative connection between previously separated groups, especially in educational settings where social and intellectual skills are nurtured and developed. Educational communities have become more and more a space of relations among subjects, both teachers and students, that come into a shared practice by bringing their diverse heritage of geographical, cultural, and religious origins (Morita 2004; Haneda 2006; Niesz 2010). This shift has affected the relation between individuals and their communities, opening up to the possibility of multiple belongings and fragmenting the correspondence between membership and commitment to the same understanding of the pursued good. For MacIntyre, deliberation within networks of giving and receiving is about means, not ends, about the allocation of responsibilities, not about the content of these responsibilities. However, people who hold multimembership across different communities will

often have to deal at least with the reconciliation of different understandings of what is good and valued in each context and to engage with different sets of responsibilities.

It is a trend further emphasized by the advent of internet social networks that increasingly enhance the possibility to directly interact within communities of practice that have a strong core of commitments, characteristic internal codes and shared moral understandings, but are not based locally in any specific place. In a sense, not being bound by the immediate reference to a single context enhances the possibility for people to create close communities with likeminded people who share the same area of practice. But are these kinds of delocalized and dematerialized networks of giving and receiving still supportive of non-interested relationship that, as MacIntyre suggests, are required for the development of independent practical reasoners committed to a common good? The kind of relationship he describes in these terms:

> So each of us achieves our good only if and insofar as others make our good their good by helping us through periods of disability to become ourselves the kind of human being – through acquisition and exercise of the virtues – who makes the good of others her or his good, and this not because we have calculated that, only we help others, will they help us, in some trading of advantage for advantage (DRA: 108)

It seems at least possible. A positive suggestion comes from the experience of multiple communities that establish far-ranging networks of mutual dependency and assistance. As sociologists of media have noticed, when communities are faced with extraordinary difficulties, now the needs that emerge in a community are more easily connected and intertwined beyond local boundaries, establishing relevant "networks of giving and receiving", even across the world. Community reactions to natural disasters are a case in point. The use of social media has transformed the way communities face extreme adversities such as floods and earthquakes (Hjorth and Kim 2011; Ahmed et al. 2013; Kim and Hastak 2017), by allowing different local communities to interact with each other exchanging information, help, and emotional support. Even distant communities that are not affected by the disaster seek direct relationships with those who have been hit and promote campaigns to organize volunteer expeditions, gather money and provide different forms of relief. Local communities also establish direct relationships with relevant communities of practice such as state agencies or business organizations, effectively creating upon the emerging needs a network of information and action across multiple communities. It is an interesting case because here someone's needs provide reasons for action not only to the other members of that community, but also to other communities that have different cultural traits (like people in large metropolis across the world mobilizing for flood victims in rural Australia) and different purpose (like business organizations providing

information and emergency awareness to local communities or emergency agencies acting as a bridge for communication and help between affected communities). Communities that have little shared background thus manage to establish bonds of solidarity and to pursue a collective good, maybe for a limited time, but often with no expectation of receiving anything in return, if not based on the awareness that MacIntyre suggests of close communities: that because of a shared vulnerability, one has a reason to provide for the other outside of specific economic transactions or stipulated agreements.

Social networks and reverse embedding of nonmarket relationships

If on one side the impact of the internet on the communicative structures of societies has contributed to increase the possibility of multimembership in different communities of practice and to expand bonds of solidarity across local boundaries, *the rise of corporate social media as the prevailing structure of this new space of communication and collaboration has created an entirely new set of problems*.

In particular, we have previously considered that in DRA MacIntyre articulates a critique of the detachment between market relationships of interested exchange and nonmarket relationships of dependency and solidarity, arguing that the former are to be embedded in the latter to contribute over time to the flourishing of society. While the general direction of this critique is still relevant, it is important to observe that the interplay between market and nonmarket relationships has been undergoing important transformations, to the point that a reformulation of this critique is in order to take this ongoing shift into account. A salient aspect of the impact of social media on society has not been, in fact, primarily their contribution to phenomena of dis-embedding of market relationships from nonmarket ones, but rather a new form of reverse embedding of nonmarket relationships into market relationships. Social networks, in fact, create digital environments that fuel market goals by making use of the attention and trust people mutually nurture by sharing their personal lives and affective relations through the online platforms. In this way, "Social-media companies leverage the human trust that clusters around the activity of friends sharing information with one another in order to manipulate us into sharing information with advertisers" (Deibert : 31). This is especially true in the case of social networks like Facebook whose main business model revolves around exploiting the trust that people build with their close relationships of friends, family and colleagues to share their personal information with advertisers (Waldman 2016). A striking outcome of this reverse embedding of non-market relations into market-driven social networks is people increasingly developing "parasocial relationships" (Horton and Wohl 1956) with a large number of internet celebrities and influencers: after they have been "repeatedly exposed to a media persona", they "develop a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification with the celebrity" as if they were part of the

same close network, while actually these kinds of relationships are abundantly exploited for advertisement and product placement (Chung and Cho 2017: 452).

More profoundly, as new spaces of intermediation, these social networks favour a *communicative style of simplification, emotionalization and negativity that in time also affects the content of the conversation of local communities and communities of practice*. This is not surprising in the light of the Mcluhanian awareness that "the medium is the message": the pervasive success of new media always has an impact that reshapes both forms and content of communication in a society. Data about users are collected and sold, users are profiled and nourished specific forms of content and advertisement, echo chambers are formed where only like-minded individuals interact with one another and corroborate their common beliefs. The promise of transparent immediacy that comes with these digital platforms obscures the fact that they are not neutral, but "programmed" environments that respond to a series of choices that determine their structure and influence their usage. These choices are dictated by economic interests, commercial strategies, and technological options that end up governing from the inside the online landscape. Among others, Byung-Chul Han has articulated a philosophical insight into the impact of this connection between communication, society and politics. Although there are aspects of his analysis that lose some of the complexity of the phenomena at stake, his perspective is useful to get a sense of how this change in the kind of relationship that people entertain in the digital sphere is affecting also their way or reasoning and engaging with each other politically.

First, Han notes that while in a community the space of shared conversations always has some definite representative properties, there is a definite novelty when market relations become the framework where all personal and collective representations appear:

> The theatre is a site of expression. But acts of expression here are objective feelings and not manifestations of psychic interiority. Therefore they are represented and not exhibited. The world today is no theatre where actions and feelings are represented and interpreted, but a market on which intimacies are exhibited, sold, and consumed. The theatre is a site of representation, whereas the market is a site of exhibition. Today theatrical representation is yielding to pornographic exhibition. (Han 2015: 34)

Second, he captures this transition as a mutual collapse of the individual into the collective, of the private into the public and vice versa. People now tend to inhabit spaces that, like markets, allow to buy and sell with likeminded customers the kind of content that a consumer seeks:

> Social media and personalized search engines set up, in the internet, a space of absolute closeness [*Nahraum*]; here the outside has been eliminated. One encounters only oneself and one's own life. No negativity stands available to make change possible. This digital vicinity

[*Nachbarschaft*] offers users only sectors of the world that please them. In this fashion, it dismantles the public sphere [*Öffentlichkeit*] – indeed, it dismantles public, critical consciousness – and it privatizes the world. The internet transforms into an intimate sphere or comfort zone. Proximity, from which all distance has been eliminated, is another form in which transparency finds expression. (Han 2015: 35)

This inevitably comes with political implications, since the reverse embedding of non-market relations into market ones gradually introduces a profound mutation of the conditions of public discourse:

The tyranny of intimacy psychologizes and personalizes everything. Even politics cannot escape its grasp. Accordingly, politicians are no longer measured by their actions. Instead, general interest concerns their persons; this entails compulsive staging on their part. The loss of the public sphere leaves behind a void; intimate details and private matters pour into it. Publicizing a persona takes the place of the public sphere. In the process, the public sphere becomes an exhibition space. It grows more and more distant from the space of communal action. (Han 2015: 35)

The public sphere thus becomes dominated by processes of identification of the public with ideological banners and controversial figures that are offered to the moment by moment consumption of increasingly divided and polarized communities. And the more the concrete networks of giving and receiving that people belong to (families, local communities, communities of practice) are embedded within this kind of communicative space, the more they start to fragment and divide along lines of collective identification that overpower their original boundaries of proximity and familiarity. As political societies become increasingly polarized, the cracks in the previously basic experiences of commonality start to show. As Robert Talisse notes in his recent work on the destructive impact of polarization and political partisanship on the public discourse of American society, a common experience is now for festive events like Thanksgiving, traditionally celebrating boundaries of familial unity and solidarity, to become a sobering display of how deep political and ideological divisions run through previously unquestioned bonds:

Now, despite the holiday's pensive ambitions, Thanksgiving dinner is a notorious site of familial angst. Consequently, early in every November newspapers, magazines, websites, and television programs offer advice on "surviving" the ordeal of Thanksgiving. Going back several years, one can find columns of this kind that cover the usual fare for large gatherings of relatives – bad cooking, boring conversation, prying questions, ill-behaved children, and so on.

> In recent years, however, the focus has shifted nearly exclusively on strategies for avoiding or navigating *political disagreement* over the dinner table. (Talisse 2019: 2)

It remains to be seen, then, how we can reconsider the MacIntyrean account of political reasoning among independent practical reasoners so that it takes into account these ongoing transformations.

The troubled boundary between practical and political reasoning

First, we have suggested that there is a growing *diversification and delocalization of the experiences of membership in a community*. The pluralization of society and the emergence of new digital infrastructures of communication are producing a chance for more diverse forms of engagement among practical reasoners that draw discursive resources from their memberships in multiple communities of practice and their delocalized experiences of interdependence and solidarity.

Second, we argued that the growing influence of new social media is leading to a *reverse embedding of non-market relations into market ones*. The pervasive impact of corporate-driven internet platforms is contributing to a crisis of public discourse, as it determines a fragmentation of the shared conversation among citizens into separate epistemic bubbles and supports the formation of polarized collective identities that supplant traditional community bonds, thus hindering the development of proper forms of shared reasoning and decision-making about the common good.

This double bind shows how the transformation of the ways and means through which people engage with each other and form collective experiences is affecting the MacIntyrean picture of the interplay between the kinds of social relations people entertain and their formation as independent practical reasoners. But *how does this reflect on their agency as citizens*?

In chapter 11 of DRA MacIntyre infers some political implications from the discussion about the communitarian genesis of independent practical reasoning that we have considered earlier. MacIntyre envisages a political society where the experience of mutual dependency shapes the conception of the common good. In order to flourish, this kind of political society needs an integrated space of giving and receiving, "some form of local community within which the activities of families, workplaces, schools, clinics, clubs dedicated to debate and clubs dedicated to games and sports, and religious congregations may all find a place" (DRA: 135). In our analysis, however, we argued that other kinds of communities and even cross-community interactions increasingly provide similar spaces. This observation can very well be integrated with MacIntyre openness to a comparative revision of his interpretive frame of reference, as he states:

> What extended comparative study of the varying characteristics of communities that embody
> networks of giving and receiving may teach us is how better to identify what relationships of
> the relevant kinds of giving and receiving already exist in our own local community and how
> perhaps to greater extent than we have realized there is already a degree of shared recognition
> of the common good. (DRA: 144)

The only substantial integration we suggest is that "the relevant kinds of giving and receiving" at this point exist across quite diverse communities of practice and beyond the geographical localization of our networks of relations. Indeed, even in these new spaces of interaction, "perhaps to greater extent than we have realized there is already a degree of shared recognition of the common good": enough to support displays of solidarity and forms of mutual learning across great geographical and cultural distances, as the cases of intercultural educational communities and natural disaster responses suggest.

This observation has important political implications, since the more we articulate and expand our network of significant relations of dependency and solidarity, the more we also extend the range of our relationships as citizens that recognize each other and are capable to engage in political deliberation:

> It now becomes clear that these attitudes of regard must be understood from the outset as
> political attitudes. To treat someone else as someone for whom we have a regard because of
> what, one way or another, they contribute to our shared education in becoming rational givers
> and receivers is to accord them political recognition. It is to treat them as someone whom it
> would be wrong to ignore or to exclude from political deliberation.
> This conception of political reasoning as one aspect of everyday practical reasoning has as its
> counterpart a conception of political activity as one aspect of the everyday activity of every
> adult capable of engaging in it. (DRA: 141)

So, even if we suggest the need for an integration of the social picture that comes with it, the normative side of the MacIntyrean analysis remains, at its core, largely valid. Against the attempt of establishing the conditions of public discourse and political deliberation through mental experiments and procedural means, as it is typical of public reason theories, this perspective highlights that we cannot separate the concrete interactions of giving and receiving within communal relations from the formation of a proper political discourse over the good. The ability of citizens to hold this conversation cannot be achieved through "the mastery of some theoretical formulas", nor "primarily and never only by theoretical reflection, but in everyday shared activities and the evaluations of alternatives that those activities impose" (DRA: 107-108). Although this approach has been sometimes criticized for favouring a closed form of political

communitarianism, this is not necessarily the case. As those "everyday shared activities" expand and evolve overtime in tune with the diversification of society and the expansion of its communicative infrastructure, so the understanding of our relevant political relations also does expand and evolve, thus integrating the growing diversity and complexity.

It is only by taking into account the kind of relationships that citizens entertain with each other as participants in their concrete network of social relations that we can also understand their mutual exercise of moral authority among citizens that, as equals, raise normative claims and come to publicly deliberate on them. As Robert Talisse noted, in contrast with the fixation of public reason liberalism on the "appropriate contents" of public discourse:

> In order to vindicate our practices of social morality, one needs more than a theory of when a demand has the right *content*. The practice of making demands always is engaged among persons who bear relations of various kinds to each other. And there are some who simply do not have the *standing* to issue certain kind of moral demands, even in cases where the content of their demand satisfies The Basic Principle of Public Justification. (Talisse 2014: 560)

From this vantage point, the MacIntyrean understanding of political reasoning is also more acutely aware of the problems raised by the reverse embedding of non-market relationships into market ones and how it affects the sphere of our political interactions. The ability to cultivate social relationships that are outside of our "comfort zones" as consumers of communicative contents and with "sectors of the world" that do not immediately please us – to use Han's suggestive terminology – is a condition to also preserve a political "space of communal action" shared with other citizens with whom we may not share membership in the same local community nor in the same segment of the social media, but that still cross our path within one of the multiple communities of practice we belong to or because of a bond of solidarity we developed when facing an overwhelming peril.

I suggest, then, that becoming an independent practical reasoner increasingly involves integrating the reflective awareness of the plurality of sources of interpretation of the good with which one comes to interact in a plurality of communities of practice and across local and global boundaries of social interaction. This kind of awareness also provides a solid normative basis to reject the exclusivity that is typical of polarized collective identifications that arise inside epistemic bubbles and moral echo chambers created by the consumeristic mechanisms of corporate social media. Our fellow citizens, as moral agents that contribute to our "shared education in becoming rational givers and receivers", are irreducible to likeminded consumers. The Wengerian process of reconciliation of multiple memberships into one's personal identity as

a practical reasoner engaged in different communities of practice prepares to a discursive relation with others that is indeed grounded in our concrete mutual relationship of giving and receiving. By engaging in these relationships, we are already practically introduced to the need to reconcile differing interpretations of the good, of our mutual responsibilities, of the relevant kinds of discourse.

For this kind of formative process to happen, however, we need the infrastructure of communication that supports this extended social experience of giving and receiving not be entirely colonized by the mechanism of reverse embedding of non-market relationships into market ones. In other words, in order to preserve healthy conditions of public discourse among the citizens, we must decouple the ongoing process of extension of our relations of collaboration and solidarity from the hegemonic infrastructure of social communication that corporate social networks have been gradually establishing, with disproportionate effects over the forms and contents of the public conversation. This is a political task in itself, and not of secondary importance: it is a fundamental good of any political community of independent practical reasoners to preserve the conditions of their agency as mutual interlocutors. This includes protecting the possibility for the citizens to freely experience their relationships as givers and receivers outside of spaces governed by the self-interested logic of market actors and the dominating influence of global corporate organizations.

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